

Caring for Uncle Tan in his final years

Four years ago, a close friend's father whom I shall name Uncle Tan developed a stroke on the eve of Chinese New Year when the family gathered for their reunion dinner. He was rushed to hospital where he eventually developed vascular dementia alongside the stroke. He was in hospital for about two months undergoing rehabilitation. This marked the beginning of a stressful period of caregiving for the family.

Uncle Tan had been staying with his wife, daughter and son in a cluttered 3-room HDB flat. When he was in hospital, his family visited him daily. They also had to source for special equipment such as a hospital bed, wheelchair and commode to prepare for his caregiving after hospital discharge. His son painstakingly cleared his parents' bedroom to make space for the hospital bed and for their newly-hired helper to sleep in the same room as Uncle Tan. Due to space constraint, Mrs Tan had to move into their daughter's room while the daughter moved out to sleep in the living room together with her brother (son had been sleeping in the living room all along).

After Uncle Tan was discharged from hospital and returned home, he couldn't recognise his room as it looked significantly different from the cluttered room he was used to. The bed looked different too from the queen's size bed he had been sharing with his wife. Worse, there is now a stranger (ie. the new helper) whom he was not used to yet in his own room. As a result he became confused, agitated and was apparently aggressive during the first few months - his family felt very helpless and stressed as they did not know what to do nor what was happening.



Uncle Tan used to frequent Hans restaurant before the stroke. Upon recovery, he wanted his family to bring him there every day. This request would be repeated over and over again if it was not being carried out. His son eventually brought him to Hans over the weekend as the children were working during weekdays as his elderly wife was not confident of bringing him there even with the helper's assistance as she was concerned about the long distance to the restaurant and the potential challenges



Uncle Tan would also call his wife and son constantly and demand immediate attention. The callings can persist at night as Uncle Tan had poor sleep. On top of this, his son was in the midst of planning for his wedding next year and he struggled with feelings of guilt at having to leave his mother and sister to care for their father after he shifts out upon marriage.

What touched me when I see the struggles of this family is their resilience, sacrifices and willingness to make adjustments. In the first place, the family had never liked the idea of having a live-in helper. Because of the love they had for their father, they were determined to care for him at home rather than sending him to a nursing home as they did not want him to feel abandoned. With the hiring of a helper and the space constraints, the daughter had to sacrifice her personal space and sleep in the living room on a mattress. The son also had to sacrifice his personal time in having to bring his father to Hans every weekend. This became a routine even after he got married and shifted out.

Eventually, Uncle Tan went to a dementia day care center 2-3 times a week so that his wife could have some respite. He eventually got used to, and was comfortable with, the helper and stopped calling his wife, or demanding continual attention from her, when the helper was there with him at the daycare center. His daughter would go out with her friends every Friday after work and had also taken up drawing as a form of relaxation.



Uncle Tan passed away two years later. His family knew they had done their best for him and had no regrets though his wife still missed him every now and then because Uncle Tan had been a very good husband and father during his lifetime.

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